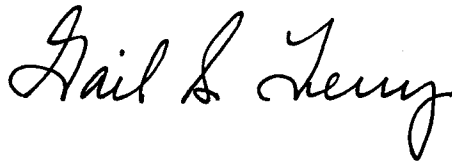


The Search for a National Identity and the Changing Representations of Benedict Arnold

**An Honors Thesis
By Jennifer Ro**

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gail L. Terry".

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Abstract

It took one television movie to initiate this research on Benedict Arnold. However, it took four years of college history classes to come to a decision about why people “invent” certain versions of historical events and turn them into “facts”. The A&E movie, *A Question of Honor*, served as the springboard for my research, and this paper offers a detailed exploration of why people choose to promote certain “truths” in the pursuit of patriotism and historical pride.

This analysis was based on my interpretation of eighteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century sources. I used the immediate eighteenth century reactions of Arnold’s treason, as well as poems, plays, and novels by such authors as Benjamin Young Prime, William Dunlap, and Mason Locke Weems. Twentieth and twenty-first century children’s books, biographies, and film have also been incorporated to get a more modern perspective on Arnold’s treason. Included in the research are primary sources from such authors as biographers James Kirby Martin and William Sterne, as well as children’s books by Clarence Lindsey Alderman and Ann Rinaldi. I have also relied on the works of Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacobs, and Eric Hobsbawm in order to get the theory and method of how the American identity was created.

Using these sources I have developed my own interpretation of how the American identity was created through Benedict Arnold’s actions. There was a need for Americans to create a symbol that would show what it meant to be “un-American.” Arnold provided the symbolism that the American people needed to educate others on what it means not only to be “un-American,” but also what it meant to be “American,” a symbolism that has lived on in years of representations.

Acknowledgements

- I would like to, first of all, thank Professor Gail Terry for helping me find the direction that I needed, especially at the end of this project, as well as looking over drafts of my paper along the way to make sure I remain on track. I also thank you for allowing me to sound off my ideas and frustrations; for if it was not for your sympathetic ear, I would probably never get this paper finished.

- Professor James Connolly, I would also like to thank you for getting me started on the path of how I should go about defining nationalism. Without your guidance, I would probably still be scratching my head wondering what nationalism exactly means.

- Finally, I would like to acknowledge my friend Lauren Thorpe, my English guru. I bow down to you for allowing me to take up some of your time in order to bounce ideas off of you when I hit those pesky blocks, as well as looking over different pages of this thesis. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Forward

A little girl enters a fifth grade classroom. As soon as she sits down, the teacher tells the students to take out their books for their United States history lesson. For this girl, this moment was an exciting one. History was her favorite subject, and she could not wait to hear what new event that they would be talking about that day.

As the teacher tells the class to turn to the assigned page, the girl finds that they are about to study the various people involved in the American Revolution. A boy in the class raises his hand and asks, "Who was that man was riding the horse through the dark of night?"

"Why, that was Paul Revere, Billy," the teacher states. "He was the brave young man who made that lone midnight journey to warn to American colonists that the British coming to their village."

"And what about that woman there with a flag," the little girl says. "Who is she?"

"That is Betsy Ross. She was the woman who sewed our nation's flags. Those thirteen stars represent the thirteen American colonies, as do the thirteen red and white bars. Betsy Ross represents the unity of the American colonies."

The little girl was impressed. As the class continued, she learned about the heroics of George Washington. The only thing that she had known of George Washington until this point was that he was the first President of the United States, and that he lied about the cherry tree when he said that he did not cut it. She was very impressed, and at the same time, she felt a sense of pride learning about all these people.

Seven years later, this same girl decides to go to college to pursue a degree in the subject that she had a passion for too years: history. One of the first classes that she takes is an

American history class. She is confident that doing this will fuel the same fervor that she had felt when she was that little girl so many years ago.

As she enters the room, that first day of class, she feels a sense of confidence that she knows a lot about American history. As soon as she sits down, the professor walks in and starts his lecture. The lecture that the professor gave distressed her greatly. During a discussion on Columbus, the professor describes his brutality towards the Native Americans, and the myth of his “discovery” of the shape of the Earth.

Myth? Columbus really did not discover that the world was round instead of flat? This really disturbs the girl. For most of her life, she was told that Columbus was the first to discover America, and that it was he who announced that the world was round. Had what her teachers had taught her in the past all lies?

As the college years began to fade, the girl began to discover a lot of supposed “truths” that she once believed. Betsy Ross did not really sew the flag. George Washington and the cherry tree was a myth, and Paul Revere was not the lone midnight rider. She started to become disillusioned and frustrated over her beliefs. Why would her teachers lie to her? Did they assume that telling the “sunnier” side of history would make her like history any better? She became bitter and confused. She could not understand why people would tell her such stories...

Introduction

When the American colonists won the final battle at Yorktown in 1781, the newly independent Americans had many new problems that the victory in the American Revolutionary War did not solve. The very fact of winning the war against Britain introduced a new problem: who exactly were the Americans? Even a victory did not mean an automatic American nation.

For more than a century, the only identity that many of the colonists could relate to was the identity of Great Britain. There was little the colonists could call their own.

With a country no longer ruling over them, the American people had to create a new identity, one that did not emulate the ideas of other countries. The problem was what values, ideas, or beliefs could help shape the new American national identity? Most of all, what does it mean to have a sense of nationhood?

Depending on whom one asks, one might receive several answers. One interpretation views nationalism as a group of people bound together by a common idea, belief, or culture. Another interpretation adds to this definition as a necessary break from monarchical rule. Others may associate nationalism with some form of patriotic pride, but can there be one true definition of nationalism? Like most things, the meaning of nationalism has changed. A new definition is needed to fit the various complexities of present-day nations.

Not only does nationalism have to be redefined, but also what it means and represents to a group of people, in this case, the American people. Why do we form the beliefs that we do, and how does this reflect our nation? Is it right to portray an image of patriotism when some of the symbols that it represents are not accurate? Why is it that we choose one view of history and not others?

History should not be one-sided; however, one sometimes gets the feeling that it has a tendency to be that way. One should not only understand history, but also not to be afraid to question it. There are at least two sides to every story; yet, most people would much rather hear the version that is either more popular or more positive. Much of our national identity seems to be structured around the belief that fabrications of the truth should override the truth itself. We are taught in our schools that Columbus realized the world was round rather than flat, and that

Betsy Ross sewed the famous American flag. Why do we base who we are on events that are not always accurate? Perhaps it is time to examine the events of our history in a different light. If not to be truthful, at least to not have the next generation of Americans assume that history is full of cherry trees and kindness to the Indians.

When people hear the name Benedict Arnold, the first word that comes to mind is traitor. Benedict Arnold represents what it means not to be an American. His name has been vilified for years that many people have forgotten why he did what he did, or may not know what caused him to betray his country. Many people do not realize that Arnold was once a Revolutionary hero and a close friend of George Washington, the man he betrayed. Arnold saved Saratoga for the Americans; he helped to make American independence a reality.

However, we never see this side of Arnold in history classes or textbooks. Instead, we see him as a devilish traitor who should have been hanged for his misdeeds. Arnold's name has been so synonymous with traitor so that people use it as an analogy in reference to every betrayal from the American Taliban member John Walker Lindh to Alger Hiss of the Red Scare. Even through the vilification, we still for the most part do not recognize why we choose Arnold as the standard bearer for treason. Is there another way to see the man and to understand his actions?

The hatred toward Arnold will most likely never die down. Americans' association of Arnold with what it meant to be "un-American" gave them a stronger sense of national identity. It is in this common hatred for a man like Arnold that the American public could work out its own issues of identity. Through Arnold, they discovered what qualities were unworthy to be considered "American." It mattered little what Arnold had accomplished before his treason; all that mattered was what happened after it had occurred.

For Americans, attempting to create an identity for themselves shortly after gaining their independence from Britain in 1781, there was a need for traditions and symbols to bring the American people together as one nation. However, not all symbols needed to be “positive” in order to inspire nationalism. As the following case study will show; negative symbols, such as the one exemplified by Benedict Arnold, can represent a kind of “other” national identity: they show what it means not to be an American. In many instances, the bad, just as the good, can create a sense of identity that many people will never forget.

Creating an American Identity

For the United States, the need to “invent” an identity partly explains the need to create stories such as the ones about George Washington and the cherry tree and Betsy Ross and the flag. The American Revolution did little in unifying the thirteen colonies. If anything, it simply liberated themselves from a single ruler. Evidence of disunity can be seen throughout various events such as the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, and even the United States Constitution. According to Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs, authors of *Telling the Truth About History*, the Declaration’s “self-evident truths that all men were created equal proved more divisive than conciliating in a society of slave-holders.”¹

Despite the fact that the American colonists had recently liberated themselves from the control of the British, they did not yet share a single, common national identity. Many colonists saw themselves first as Virginians, Rhode Islanders, and even Bostonians before they ever saw themselves as Americans. What the colonists needed was an identity that was separate from that

¹ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1994), 96.

of any other country, and that would bind the nation together. The handiest unifying context that many colonists could associate with was the American Revolution.

Essentially an “invention” was needed to bring a sense of nationalism to the American people. According to Eric Hobsbawm, editor of *The Invention of Tradition*, an “‘invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition...In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”²

For the newly formed United States, that “suitable historic past” was the American Revolution. Many stories came out of the Revolution. General Washington’s heroics were well known with many colonists along the East Coast. However, even the actual accounts were still not good enough. What the American people needed was something bigger, something that would bring the colonists as a whole together. What they needed was something legendary. As Appleby, Hunt, and Jacobs state, “Americans had to invent what Europeans inherited: a sense of solidarity, a repertoire of national symbols, a quickening of political passions.”³

Although the American colonists were fighting for the cause for freedom, it did little to bring solidarity to the people. What were needed was symbols, or as Hobsbawm states “invented traditions” to bring the sense of solidarity into full focus. Ideas such as the story of Betsy Ross and the American flag, as well as George Washington and his god-like status, were created so as to establish pride and cohesiveness to the American people. Even though such stories, as Ross’ and Washington’s may not be entirely true, they provide tangible symbols of nationhood and American identity. “The element of invention is particularly clear here, since the history which

became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so.”⁴

The function for the American people was to find events and people that would create a sense of identity. Whenever a crisis occurs when American ideology or beliefs were at stake, there was always the need to “invent” something that would bring the nation together. The “Star-Spangled Banner”, for example, was adopted as the national anthem, in effect, “invented” as a national symbol to create national unity shortly after the start of the Great Depression in 1931. For more than one hundred years, the “Star-Spangled Banner”, had laid dormant as simply a poem that inspired an American battle one night in 1814; it was not until after World War I and the Great Depression when the poem, now converted into a song, was used to inspire pride and patriotism in Americans.

For the American people, there has always been a need to create national symbols, like the “Star-Spangled Banner,” in order to bring together the nation in pride and patriotism. Yet, in Arnold’s case, not all symbols have to be “positive” in order to inspire a sense of national identity. Arnold’s treason represents another side to creating an identity: what it means to be un-American. The creation of an un-American identity through Arnold’s traits helped in establishing a belief that would live long in the American people’s memory for years to come.

Biography of Benedict Arnold

Born in January 14, 1741, Benedict Arnold grew up in a well-known and influential family. One of six children⁵ of Benedict Arnold IV and Hannah Waterman, Benedict Arnold V

² Eric Hobsbawm, introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

³ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacobs, 92.

was, according to his mother, “hand-picked by God for greatness.”⁶ Arnold’s great-great-great grandfather, William escaped from English persecution under the Stuart monarch like many other people of the time and immigrated to the American colonies. Arnold’s great-great grandfather, Benedict Arnold I, was elected as governor-elect of Rhode Island after its founder Roger Williams, the first governor of Rhode Island and its founder. Arnold I was a well-loved man who also accumulated considerable wealth during his lifetime. Following him was, Benedict Arnold II, Arnold V’s great grandfather, who managed to spend the entire family fortune. Arnold’s grandfather, Benedict Arnold III did not live long to build up the family fortune or to see his children grow up.

Arnold’s father, Benedict Arnold IV, helped rebuild some of the family fortune by moving to Norwich, Connecticut, and becoming a ship’s captain, trader, businessman, and cooper. Here he met Arnold’s mother Hannah Waterman and finally settled down with her to produce their children, one of whom would be Benedict Arnold V, who became famous during the Revolutionary War.

Reared in a strict Protestant household, Arnold received a formal education that entailed the studying of Latin, mathematics, English, logic and history. There were stories that at the age of fifteen, Arnold ran away from home to enlist in the New York state militia. He supposedly fought off French invaders in western New York during the early years of the French and Indian War, but shortly thereafter deserted. Many historians believe that this was a different Benedict Arnold than Benedict Arnold V since the latter was under an apprenticeship contract, which would have made it difficult for him to leave.

⁴ Hobsbawm, 13.

⁵ Only two live to adulthood, Benedict Arnold and his sister, Hannah. The other four died in during outbreaks of epidemic diseases.

⁶ Barry K. Wilson, *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in Our Midst* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 3.

If Arnold took part in the militia, according to James Kirby Martin author of *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero*, it was only briefly during the Seven Years' War. "Arnold...may have joined the Norwich column as it marched for Albany. However, Montcalm's [a French commander] force...quickly retreated northward, and the Connecticut units returned home...representing his [Arnold's] only martial experience before the Revolutionary War."⁷

Shortly after his return, Arnold decided to work as an apothecary and follow in his father's footsteps in coastal trade. For years, Arnold was indentured and apprenticed to merchants Daniel and Joshua Lathrop. Cousins to his mother, the alcoholism of Arnold's father led to his being placed in their care. Under the supervision of the Lathrops, Arnold learned about the mercantile and apothecary businesses.

He became extremely prosperous in these ventures, extending his trade and shipbuilding enterprises into the West Indies and Canada. However, towards the beginning of his ventures, Arnold suffered two tragedies, within a couple years of each other. The first was his mother's death in 1759. Due in part to the stress of her husband's drinking and financial problems, Arnold's mother died of a mysterious illness. This was a heavy blow to Arnold, for they were very close. "Mother and son surely had become more dependent on each other as they suffered through the loss of family members, as they dealt with the Captain's [Arnold's father] intensifying alcohol problem, and as they endured the shame of their collapsing financial circumstances."⁸

The second tragedy dealt with Arnold's father. After his wife's death, Arnold's father fell deeper into alcoholism. Eventually, his problem was exposed to the public and to the local church. Constantly fined for his public drunkenness, the local church in Norwich demanded that

⁷ James Kirby Martin, *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 29.

Arnold's father come to the church to be publicly renounced for his sins. Unfortunately Arnold's father refused and was threatened with excommunication. However, that step would not be necessary, Arnold's father died in 1761 from an alcohol-related illness.

Eventually Arnold and his sister, Hannah, made their way to New Haven. There, Arnold's mercantile business flourished until the issuance of the new legislation from Great Britain. Arnold and other merchants ignored these acts, such as the Stamp Act, and Arnold even went to the West Indies to smuggle in molasses and avoid paying duties on it. Unfortunately, these actions got Arnold in trouble. A mariner one night caught Arnold bringing in goods without paying the proper duties and reported him to the customs house. As a form of revenge, Arnold dragged him outside and whipped him forty times. The Justice of the Peace ordered Arnold's arrest, and he was fined fifty shillings for "disturbing the peace."

Soon after, Arnold met the woman who was to become his first wife, Margaret "Peggy" Mansfield. They were married in late February 1767 and had three sons: Benedict VI, Richard, and Henry. However, Peggy died in 1775 just after the start of the American Revolution. Left alone with three sons, Arnold engaged his sister Hannah to care for his young sons.

Prior to the start of the American Revolution, Arnold was elected to the position of captain in the Connecticut militia. Despite his lack of military experience, Arnold was given the position based on "personal wealth, his reputation as an firm advocate of American liberties, and his high standing among New Haven's working people."⁹

One of his first duties was the capture of cannons and munitions at Fort Ticonderoga. The venture was originally Arnold's idea, and he was given the green light for the plans, raised to the rank of colonel, and given commission in the Massachusetts army. Realizing that he needed

⁸ Martin, 30.

assistance, he requested the help of Ethan Allen and his “Green Mountain Boys.” The battle was easily won, and two forts were captured along Lake Champlain.

Afterwards, controversy erupted between Arnold and Allen. Allen and his compatriots claimed the glory for the success of the Ticonderoga campaign, leaving Arnold to look like the fool. Bad blood ensued, and eventually Arnold was forced to resign his commission as commander at Ticonderoga because the state of Connecticut preferred Allen for the job.

Shortly thereafter, Arnold received permission from General George Washington to attack Quebec, along with a commission as a colonel in the Continental Army. Arnold went into Quebec with the intention of capturing the city, but unfortunately, he and his troops were hindered by the treachery of a colonel who took some of Arnold’s troops and possession and deserted, returning to Massachusetts. Even without the manpower and supplies, Arnold and his troops managed to survive getting through the wilderness to Quebec with the help of reinforcements from Montreal.

When news of Arnold’s successful mission reached Washington and the Continental colonies, praise was laid upon Arnold. One delegate to the Continental Congress wrote home that Arnold’s march of “that little army...is thought equal of Hannibal’s over the Alps.”¹⁰ Many colonists felt that Arnold’s actions were noble and brave. Once his troops received the supplies, they stormed Quebec, but Arnold did not stay for the entire battle because he was seriously injured in the leg early in the battle.

For his actions Arnold was promoted to the rank of brigadier-general. He remained in Quebec for a short period of time, until he was relieved of his duties in order to take command of the fort at Montreal. Unfortunately, this post did not last long; the British were making their way

⁹ Martin, 62.

through Canada, regaining their lost territory. Arnold had to retreat with his men back to Ticonderoga.

While at Ticonderoga, Arnold decided to help build a fleet of ships that would have some chance of standing up to the powerful British naval forces. Their first attempt at battle came in October 1776, at a place near Lake Champlain called Valcour Island. Arnold's fleet suffered devastating losses. The strength and size of the British ships and troops was too much for Arnold's troops, although they did manage to escape back to Ticonderoga. Despite the loss, something valuable that was gained. Biographer William Sterne states "Arnold had lost a battle and a fleet, but by building a fleet and forcing the British to do likewise, he had imposed a year's delay on Carleton [a British general] and made impossible the British strategy to divide the colonies and conquer them."¹¹

With the postponement of the British advancement, and the eventual retreat of Carleton to Montreal, Ticonderoga was saved from a possible British invasion. This save allowed Gates, who was commanding Ticonderoga, to send troops to Trenton to assist George Washington in his famous Christmas evening attack. However, although many high-ranking generals and common people praised Arnold's quick save, many others felt that Arnold had wasted too many lives and overstepped his bounds. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, for example, condemned Arnold's actions at Valcour Island by writing to Thomas Jefferson, "we had reason to think ourselves in no danger on that water for this campaign."¹²

However, this controversy was only the first step in a new round of vilification of Arnold. Shortly after his return to Ticonderoga, a Major John Brown, who had crossed paths with Arnold

¹⁰ William Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 189.

¹¹ Sterne, 317.

¹² Richard Henry Lee to Thomas Jefferson, 1776, as quoted in Sterne, 319.

before, accused Arnold of various crimes, some of which included theft of property while he held his commission at Montreal and slander towards Major Brown. Refusing to stand down from such allegations, Arnold willingly went to Congress to confront the allegations. Moved by Arnold's attitude and eyewitness testimony, as well as his character witnesses, the Continental Congress found the charges brought against Arnold "so cruelly and groundlessly aspersed in Brown's publication."¹³ Arnold was cleared of all the charges; however, his seniority as a general was not reinstated. Without his seniority, Major General Arnold decided to resign the Continental Army.

The resignation that Benedict Arnold was about to deliver did not go through. At the same time that Arnold was writing his letter, a battle was about to take place in New York. British General John Burgoyne was planning another "divide and conquer" strategy in New York, and Washington wanted Arnold to be there.

Once he got to the base of operations near Saratoga, Arnold immediately reported to the commander of the battle, General Horatio Gates. Once friends, both Gates and Arnold fell out of friendship. Arnold stressed to Gates that an offensive attack was the best plan, but Gates would not listen. Instead, Gates preferred to keep the lines fortified and stay on the defensive, a plan that Arnold saw dangerous. Arnold felt that if the Continental forces were to lie in wait, then it would give the British troops the chance to move their artillery closer to the colonists' lines.

Frustrated with the lack of action on the part of Gates, as well as the ignoring of his ideas, Arnold decided to take matters in his own hands. Jumping on his horse, Arnold sped to the front lines and spurred the soldiers to charge the enemy. His actions broke through the British lines, causing the British troops to go in retreat. Arnold was wounded in the Battle of Saratoga, shot in

¹³ Sterne, 338.

the same leg that he had hurt in Quebec. Many felt that Arnold's actions at Saratoga had won the battle and gained the alliance of France.

Because of his heroics, Arnold received a reinstatement of his seniority status as general. Still not fit for field service, Washington assigned Arnold to a command position in Philadelphia. Here, he met his second wife, Peggy Shippen. Shippen came from a prominent Tory family, and her father was a chief justice in Philadelphia. Here, Arnold began the downward spiral that would lead to his infamous deed.

In Philadelphia, Arnold mingled with high society, specifically Tory society. He lived in extravagance, which caused him to fall into debt. Arnold also ran across problems with a man, named Joseph Reed, who made accusations against Arnold's integrity and his dealings with using military transportation for private ventures. Like the Brown accusations, Arnold demanded an opportunity to confront his accuser. Arnold wanted a speedy trial, but unfortunately, the inquiry was a slow one. At the end of the inquiry, performed by a committee in the Continental Congress, they found Arnold not guilty of the accusations against his integrity, but guilty of abuse of military equipment. As a punishment, Arnold received a reprimand from Washington, administered reluctantly.

Bitter about the way that he was being treated and disillusioned with the continuing war, Arnold decided to desert the Army. Thinking that better opportunities would await him if he defected, Arnold wanted to give the British something useful, then he would gain status and wealth. Relying on a man by the name of John Andre as an intermediary, Arnold laid the plan to take a commission at West Point so as to turn over the fort to the British during the fall of 1780.

To take it one step further, He also planned for General Washington to be at the fort for the British to capture. With Washington under British custody, it was believed that the American

colonists would surrender. However, Arnold did not have time to implement his plan to turn over Washington and West Point. Colonists captured Arnold's co-conspirator Andre, who was on his way back from West Point, and forced the treasonous plans out of him. Realizing that Arnold had been discovered as a traitor, he fled West Point, into the safe harbor of the British.

For the rest of his life, Arnold lived in Britain and Canada with his wife Peggy and their children. No longer wanted in the colonies, Arnold tried to make a living for himself, but most of his ventures failed. Arnold died in 1801 with heavy debts and little recognition for his accomplishments. "...New Brunswick's *Royal Gazette* carried a short notice on page three: 'Died in England, Brigadier General Benedict Arnold, late of this city.' That was it. No obituary, no mention of his remarkable past, his accomplishments and heroics, his flaws...His death rated just the telling...It was fitting."¹⁴

Representations of Benedict Arnold

It did not take long for people to define Benedict Arnold's actions. Almost immediately, writers penned the words to express their sentiments of the Arnold tragedy. Shortly after Arnold's infamous deed, a Philadelphian published this verse in a local newspaper, "Master shall still their children, and say---*Arnold!* Arnold shall be the bug-bear of their years. Arnold! ---vile, treacherous, and leagued with Satan."¹⁵ Many Americans were ashamed and shocked that such a man with an illustrious military record would defect to the other side. Believing that his deeds were so "vile" and "treacherous", many people believe that his wrongdoings would live for generations to look back on.

¹⁴ Wilson, 227.

¹⁵ As quoted in Charles Royster, "'The Nature of Treason': Revolutionary Virtue and American Reactions to Benedict Arnold," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (April 1979): 164.

For a country that was still unsure of its identity, citizens stood by one principle: virtue. It was a principle that they had learned fighting the Revolutionary War. According to the historian Charles Royster, many Americans at the time placed virtue in the same categories as liberty and freedom. Royster claimed that “if the defense of liberty relied on public virtue, signs of weakness endangered both the movement for independence and the nation’s hope for survival.”¹⁶

With this idea in mind, the American people had to react quickly to the threat posed by Arnold’s action. If one person had the weakness to succumb to betrayal, what made the Americans think that there were not more traitorous people among them? This idea was unthinkable. Arnold had once been represented as brave and heroic for his deeds at battles, such as those of Quebec, Valcour, and Saratoga. However, with the actions that Arnold took at West Point, many Americans questioned who they were and what it meant to be an American. As scholarly writer, Andy Trees, explains in “Benedict Arnold, John Andre, and his Three Yeoman Captors,” “the confusion about who Arnold really was and what his treason meant stemmed from a confusion about what it meant to be American.”¹⁷ A revolution was just ending, and the American people had to define who they were as a “nation.” In doing so they used Arnold’s tale to set the stage for creating that American identity. “As his story was told and retold during the early years of the new nation, attempts to represent Arnold were a sensitive barometer of the changing beliefs about the “character” of the nation.”¹⁸

To place Arnold in the American belief system, however, a story was needed to separate the “true” Americans from the ones who did not represent the “virtue” of the American nation.

¹⁶ Royster, 164.

¹⁷ Andy Trees, “Benedict Arnold, John Andre, and his Three Yeoman Captors: A Sentimental Journey or American Virtue Defined,” *Early American Literature* 35, no. 3 (2000): 247.

¹⁸ Trees, 247.

The stereotype of Arnold as a traitor remains in the minds of many Americans, past and present. Americans feared that playing down the actions of Arnold would result in more people defecting to the other side. Articles were printed in various newspapers urging the American people not to give up in their fight against the British. Patriots were worried with the allure that British officers might offer in the form of money and status.

With Arnold's defection in the fall of 1780, the American people attempted to use this event as a way to stir up passions of patriotism towards the Americans. Even more, Arnold's treason made the American public do something that they did not think was possible: distrust everyone around them, even themselves. There was strong hatred for the man, who led them to question their own behavior. A year after Arnold's infamous action, the *New-Jersey Journal* printed the still lasting effects of Arnold's actions, "the streets of every city and village in the United States, for many months, rung with the crimes of General Arnold."¹⁹

In many of the cities, they burned Arnold's image in effigy, most of the time alongside with the image of Satan. After the victory at Yorktown, the townspeople in Newsburgh, New York burned Arnold in effigy, a way to stick to the British that not even a traitor can bring the American independence to ruins. Even in his near his hometown, people went out to his father's tombstone in order to destroy it.²⁰ Anything to do with Arnold, the citizens did not want to have anything to do with. They blamed Arnold for the near lose of the war and making them less trustful.

Not long after the reports on public opinion towards Arnold, Benjamin Young Prime in 1781 wrote a poem called "The Fall of Lucifer, An Elegiac Poem of the Infamous Defection of the Late General Arnold." Written as an attempt to shed some sympathetic light on Arnold,

¹⁹ As quoted in Royster, 188.

Prime makes a distinction between, Arnold the soldier, and Arnold the man. In his preface, Prime states that he even “once had the highest esteem for the late General Arnold,”²¹ but refers to Arnold as if he were dead.

Like many Americans during the immediate post-Revolutionary period, Prime was torn in deciding how to portray Arnold. He felt that separating Arnold the soldier, from Arnold the man, made his actions easier to understand. “...The devil himself ought to have his due, and it must be confessed that; though Arnold, as a citizen, has eventually proved an execrable villain, his behaviour, as a soldier, has indeed been heroic...the rank and honors he sustained must needs give at least an adventitious dignity even to a scoundrel.”²² Even though Arnold may have been vile as human being, Prime does not want his audience to dismiss the fact that Arnold the American soldier deserves at least some honor for his past service to his country.

Prime begins the poem by associating Arnold with a “...bright *planet*, in its mid career,/ Sudden desert its orbit in the skies...”²³ The poet sees Arnold like a little child who needed some sort of proper guidance, but was easily manipulated into doing wrong instead. Arnold could have once been a good person, but through manipulation and lack of proper guidance, he turned to evil, “from an angel to a devil grown...”²⁴ Prime presumes that if Arnold “set in the right orbit,” then he might have not have strayed from the path.

Prime is one of the more sympathetic authors who tried to understand Arnold’s actions. However, his sympathy does not last for long. Prime supports the public outcry at the

²⁰ Royster, 188.

²¹ Benjamin Young Prime, *The Fall of Lucifer, an Elegiac Poem on the Infamous Defection of the Late General Arnold* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1781); available from <http://dlib.stanford.edu:6520/cgi-bin/hugo>; Internet.

²² Prime, 2.

²³ Prime, 2.

²⁴ Prime, 3.

wretchedness of Arnold's betrayal, and ultimately accepts that his heroic deeds in the past were a façade for his actual intentions:

“Sad! That a *soldier* of distinguish'd rate,
Who in the martial line conspicuous stood,
In feats of valour eminently great,
Should not have prov'd as eminently good!
...False *Arnold*, thou indeed hast *play'd a part*,
But now thy *real character* we scan...”²⁵

Prime sees Arnold the man as the corrupter of Arnold's soldier half. The goodness that Arnold had as a soldier is now overshadowed by the final deeds of betraying America. By visualizing the difference between the two Arnolds, the poet has given his audience a reason for stating that Arnold was not “one of the people”; he was corrupt at his birth. He makes Arnold the exception to the idea of American virtue.

Like all the other Americans, Prime writes that he was tricked like everyone else by Arnold's duplicity. Arnold the man was never good, but out for his own gain. He just used military showmanship as a way to get inside the hearts of the American people, and then stole their trust (and money). In this way, Arnold came to represent what it meant to not be an American.

Prime also associates Arnold with some of the most hated figures in Biblical history to show how much damage Arnold has done to the American psyche. “Go *cruel Arnold*, with the wicked train/ Of smaller murd'ers that have gone before;/ Go *vagabond*, like thy example CAIN...[and] Thy brother JUDAS! He his LORD betray'd.”²⁶ The stark association with such infamous men shows the cruel betrayal that the American people felt for Arnold's deeds.

²⁵ Prime, 4.

²⁶ Prime, 7-8.

A play, written six years after Prime's poem, casts an even more unfavorable light on Arnold's story. Playing on the people's hatred of the man, playwright Jabez Peck writes of the greediness and disloyalty of Arnold. In *Columbia and Britannia: a dramatic piece*, Peck uses pseudonyms to represent the players in the American Revolution. Taken from both sides, American and British, Peck's play tells of the fighting during the American Revolution, as well as of Arnold's treasonous deed. Peck breaks with events, however, in portraying the British reactions to Perjurus' (Arnold's) betrayal of the American cause.

Paramount (a British officer):
"To tell you plainly Mr. Perjurus,
We do not want your traitorship---
We bought you only for a present use;
And if for gold, you basely would betray
Your country's cause,
No doubt you'd do the same to ours---
So---sir, please to do yourself the honour----
To depart---"²⁷

Although the sentiment of the British officer is telling of the level of disgust that even the enemy has for traitors, the actual event never occurred. The enemy never dismissed Arnold after his defection, but the author wants his audience to believe that once a person is stained with the mark of betrayal, then no one will ever trust him again. Peck is trying to teach a moral lesson to his audience about loyalty. Loyalty should be stronger than the material benefits of money and glory; however, Peck attempts to present a just world where betrayal is punished. The end result is that the person is left alone to suffer the consequences of his actions.

In reality, the British did not turn him away. He was stained with the label of traitor. Instead of receiving the recognition and wealth that he believed he deserved, Arnold received cold shoulders and looks of utter disdain. According to biographer Barry K. Wilson, "He

²⁷ Jabez Peck, *Columbia and Britannia: a dramatic piece* (New London: T. Green, 1787), microcard, 58.

[Arnold] was in a London that generally ignored him. Outside the royal court and upper classes, few people considered him a hero. The mood had turned against the entire enterprise of trying to coerce the colonies into staying. Arnold seemed to represent the failed policy.”²⁸ Even though Arnold was not turned away, as he was in Peck’s play, many British citizens chose to ignore Arnold for his treason. Arnold was a man that could not be trusted for his loyalty; he was a man who could be bought at any cost.

Arnold was not simply a betrayer of the American people, but also a traitor to himself as a man. He traded in his good work for the temptation of material goods, a quality that was unbecoming and untrustworthy in a person. Arnold represented both the failed experiment in winning back the colonies for the British and the failure in loyalty. If a person is unable to be loyal to one thing, what makes anyone believe that same person will be loyal to something else. For Arnold, it was a no-win situation, with no one to rely upon; he no longer was a desirable person on both sides of the ocean.

After a while, the controversy surrounding Benedict Arnold and his deeds died down. However, with the development of the first American party system in the 1790s, the question of a unifying national identity was once again thrust in the spotlight. There was a fight among the American people concerning the support of Britain in her war against France. Labeled as anglophiles, the Federalists believed that they had an obligation to support the British cause, despite the promises and treaty obligations that were made to France. Many Americans during this time believed in the isolationist approach and wished to stay out of foreign affairs.

In era of heated debate, a new group of Federalist playwrights and novelists chose to cut Arnold out the picture of altogether, making Andre the central character. Playwrights such as

²⁸ Wilson, 162.

William Dunlap painted a more sympathetic picture of John Andre, although he stressed that he did not side for or against the Federalist support of Britain.

No longer looked upon as a traitor like Arnold, Dunlap portrayed Andre as a “Christ-like figure.” Dunlap describes Andre as a character who cared little for his own life in order to sacrifice the life of someone else, in this case, an American prisoner of war. Scholarly writer Andy Trees believes that it is this “sacrifice” that gives Andre that Christ-like quality. By disregarding his life for the life of others, plays such as Dunlap’s can be an allegory to a Christian story. The idea of sacrifice and humanity gives Dunlap’s play the impression that, like Christ, Andre was martyred in order to please the majority, rather than spared for his sense of duty he performed.

Dunlap writes in his play, *Andre: a tragedy in five acts*, that the American prisoners of war commented on how Andre possessed “every virtue of humanity.”²⁹ Dunlap writes of Andre’s humanity towards the prisoners of war, and of how many American soldiers felt that executing Andre was not in the best interest of everyone. There is little mention of Arnold’s character. In fact, he plays a minor role in many of the plays that come out during the 1790s. It is Andre who takes center stage. The playwrights portrayed Andre as the hero, as if they wished to trade Arnold for Andre.

The fact that Arnold does not play a significant role in many of these plays indicates the refusal of Americans to acknowledge his existence. They did not want past misdeeds to tarnish the American beliefs of the time. With the formation of a new government and the struggle for a Federalist rule, playwrights such as Dunlap portrayed the kind of greatness that the American

²⁹ As quoted in Trees, 260.

people wanted like to achieve, a greatness exemplified, at least from a pro-British perspective, by Andre.

However, using a British soldier as a representation of virtue could cause controversy in an American setting. Dunlap had to succumb to his audience's demands and change the angle of vision in his future plays and not cast such a positive light on a British officer. At the end of the play *Andre*, Dunlap has his American officer, the man who represents Andre's sacrifice, resign his commission after Washington's refusal to stay the execution of Andre. This ending was too pro-British, even for a Federalist audience. To stand up for the enemy over one's commander-in-chief angered many of Dunlap's audiences. Many people felt that it was not showing the "proper nature of patriotism and even of the national character itself."³⁰

Even biographers such as Mason Locke Weems latched onto the virtues of Andre. Weems includes an account that he claims to have heard from an informant of Andre's generous deeds.³¹ He, too, gives Andre a "Christ-like" character. The unfairness to Andre of the respective fates of Arnold and Andre infuriated Weems. "And yet Andre perished, on a gallows, while Arnold, after living to old age, died in his bed!...and that Andre had been good in vain?...vulgar minds are thinking of nothing but *self-preservation*, he [Andre] is thinking of nothing but *duty* and *generosity*. Regardless of himself, he is only anxious for Arnold."³²

Weems refuses to give any recognition to Arnold's actions. Portraying Arnold as not only greedy, but also unfeeling towards others. He saw Andre as a greater man, despite his British affiliation. Arnold was nothing in the eyes of the American people, but a coward who did not

³⁰ Trees, 261.

³¹ This deed entailed the freeing of a young American patriot who was captured by the British. When the "rebel" started to weep about being torn apart from his friends and family, Andre took sympathy on his problem. Andre ends up going to General Clinton for the young man's release, which he receives. See Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington* (1800; reprint, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), 104-105.

³² Weems, 105.

stand up to his duty as a patriot and a soldier. Weems does not even give Arnold credit for helping to win Saratoga, giving the credit instead of Gates.³³ Any indications of Arnold's past accomplishments are erased for the single action he took against the American colonists, and most of all General Washington. Authors like Weems believe that the success of Arnold's actions could led to the "fall of her hero [Washington]" and the "country's liberties crushed for ever."³⁴ The extent of Arnold's actions was damning, and the American public was not ready to accept any explanations for the misdeed.

During the nineteenth century, authors penned some works on Arnold. However, none of these works brought as much attention as the works published shortly after Arnold's treason, and by 1800, most of the plays and poems published during the 1800s went back to a historical formal, telling the tale of Arnold's betrayal in a straightforward manner. There is little knowledge of these literary works' popularity, lending to the assumption that many people did not care too much of the literary works, nor cared much of the Arnold story.

It was not until the mid-twentieth century, when Arnold's story enjoyed a resurgence. The difference between earlier and more recent interpretations of Arnold is that Arnold's motives in handing over West Point tend to be seen more objectively. Although there is no denying Arnold's treason, late twentieth century biographers such as James Kirby Martin and William Sterne Randall, attempt to present a better-rounded portrayal to the Arnold legacy. Instead of focusing in on the treason itself, Martin and Sterne choose to use the history of Arnold's life as background for answering the questions of why Arnold committed treason. Martin, for example, uses Arnold's life as a map to show his readers what exactly caused Arnold to make that fatal decision, using Arnold's lack of recognition as the triggering factor that led to

³³ Weems, 106.

his downfall. Both Martin and Sterne believe that Arnold did not betray his country for wealth, as some people believe, but for lack of glory.

Children's novels, which became a new Arnold genre after the mid-twentieth century, portrayed the greedier side of Arnold's betrayal. While not denying that Arnold had performed heroic deeds prior to his treason, children's authors such as Clifford Lindsey Alderman, choose to believe that it was Arnold's thirst for wealth that caused his ultimate betrayal. "Money was the god Arnold had always worshiped, and felt that with more of it he could solve all his difficulties...There was one way left to get a lot of money. Arnold knew the British would pay handsomely for helpful military information. It was then that Arnold decided on his treason."³⁵

By giving the impression that Arnold betrayed his country for money, Alderman gives the reader the impression that Arnold had no moral values. Despite his past accomplishments, the primary thrust of Arnold's treason was the need for money. Similar in nature to Peck's play, children's novels such as Alderman, present only one side of the story. The lessons that a child learns, reading these stories, gives the impression that Arnold was a man hindered by greed. The objectiveness of Arnold's contemporary biographers is rarely seen in this genre, only alluded to by giving some credit to his past military accomplishments.

However, there has been another interpretation by various authors of Arnold's intent to commit treason. There are novelists and biographers that have suggested Arnold's wife, Peggy Shippen, being brought up in a Tory household, may have influenced in Arnold's decision to defect. Young adult novels such as Ann Rinaldi's *Finishing Becca*, which is a story about a girl works as a maid to Peggy Shippen, assumes that it was Peggy's greed, not Arnold's that led to the treason.

³⁴ Weems, 103.

Recently, an A&E movie premiered, telling the tale of Arnold's betrayal. Titled, *A Question of Honor*, the movie attempts to redeem Arnold's name by giving alternative explanations for Arnold's treason. Playing on recent assumptions, such as the one by Ann Rinaldi, the A&E film shows that there were many possible reasons for Arnold's defection, the most important being his wife's influence. In the movie, it was Peggy Shippen who contacted Andre, her former lover, to set in motion the treason. Playing on Arnold's sense of betrayal of being passed over for promotions, loss of wealth, and lack of respect, Shippen convinces Arnold that by switching over to the British side, he would receive everything that he so wanted.³⁶

By diverting the blame away from Arnold, a more sympathetic picture is painted of him. Although loss of wealth and lack of respect pushed him to the breaking point, it was his wife that gave Arnold that final push over the edge. Playing on Shippen's greed and strong Tory sentiment, Arnold fell into her trap of betrayal. Using Arnold's childhood belief that he was meant to do great things, Shippen persuades Arnold that by crossing over to the British side, he will be granted those wondrous things. No longer are Arnold entirely to blame, but a misguided person who was easily manipulated into doing others bidding. The movie tries to bring a more objective view of Arnold's treason, another side to a possible motive. The A&E movie does not glorify sympathy for Arnold to the point that what he did was right, but the movie gives enough meaning to lead an audience to believe that Arnold was not entirely at fault in the treasonous plot.

Whatever the version, Arnold the traitor is the story that has lived the longest in the American minds. Not caring so much exactly what motivated Arnold to betray, most Americans use Arnold as a symbol of what it means to be un-American. Ask any person on who Benedict

³⁵ Clifford Lindsey Alderman, *The Dark Eagle: The Story of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Macmillan Publishing

Arnold is and most likely the first word that will come forth is that he was a traitor. People use Arnold's name to explain the traitorous deeds of others. "New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani last week defended himself from growing charges within the GOP that [he]...was a political Benedict Arnold for helping President Clinton..."³⁷ Even recently, American Taliban John Walker Lindh has been labeled as a Benedict Arnold for betraying his country in order to fight with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

No matter how hard one tries to bring some form of redemption to the Arnold legacy, the idea of his betrayal towards the country is too much for most Americans to handle.

"Bill Stanley has been making excuses for the General [Arnold] since 1948, when Benedict Arnold got him suspended from the Norwich Free Academy for two days...His history teacher assigned an essay on "America's Most Valuable Leader. Stanley picked Horatio Gates, the American commander at Saratoga. But as he read up on Gates, Stanley discovered a man in over his head...

...Stanley could not believe his discovery – Benedict Arnold was the real hero of Saratoga? His [Stanley's] paper became the case for Benedict Arnold as America's most valuable leader. His teacher glanced at the title, asked him if it was a joke, and sent him straight to the headmaster...

...[Stanley] was suspended for two days. Mr. Shattuck [the headmaster] never read a single paragraph of the offending paper, but half a century later, Stanley bears him no grudge. It was the start of Stanley's career as the Devil's advocate."³⁸

As for the American public, they will always remember Arnold for the traitor he was, not the military hero that he used to be. Go to Saratoga, and one will only see how little the American people view Arnold's past achievements prior to the West Point incident. At the place that Arnold was injured, there is a monument dedicated to the man who helped win the American Revolution; however there is no mention of the name of that man. "In Memory of the most brilliant soldier of the Continental Army, who was desperately wounded on this spot, the sally

Co., Inc., 1976), 105-106.

³⁶ *A Question of Honor*, color, 100 min., A&E Television Network Inc., New York, 2003.

³⁷ "Rudy 'Benedict Arnold' Giuliani," *Human Events*, 16 Sept. 1994, 17.

³⁸ John Fleischman, "The Devil's Advocate," *Yankee*, Nov. 1999.

port of Burgoyne's 'Great (Western) Redoubt'...winning for his countrymen the Decisive Battle of the American Revolution and for himself the rank of Major General."³⁹ For Arnold, the American people did not think he deserved the mere mention of "name" recognition, for his treason blackened that heroic achievement and all past achievements ever made.

The American public needed something to latch on to in order to define what it meant to be an American. Arnold just happened to present the opportunity that the American public needed. It did not matter if Arnold was misguided or lacked respect; all that mattered was that he betrayed his country. A traitor is not looked upon fondly, and with that image Americans had a "role model" to teach their children what it meant to be un-American.

Afterward

There are always different sides to a story, and Benedict Arnold is only one example of that fact. One should not accept a narrow view of history, without studying other interpretations. If not for ourselves, at least we should look at history more broadly and more critically for the next generation of learners. As "Billy," a Northern Irish Catholic, commented about the Irish Troubles (and his advice could apply for all learners of history), "Please don't let any kid suffer the history I have. I didn't deserve it and they certainly don't. Please let our next generation live normal lives. Tell them of our mistakes and admit to them our regrets."⁴⁰

If anything, we owe it to future learners to teach them that history is not always black and white. Mistakes are made; however, to pass on those mistakes as facts can have serious repercussions for future generations. Stories are good as long as we tell people that they are simply that: stories. We learn from the past in order to prevent those same mistakes from

³⁹ As quoted in the images section of Martin's biography, *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero*

occurring in the future, but there is no way to learn from those mistakes if we continue to make those same mistakes over and over again.

We should not be afraid to ask the questions, like the one Bill Stanley confronted his teacher with so many years ago. By questioning what we study, we can learn more. History should never be taken at face value. History textbooks only tell one side of the story, as well as various novels, films, and articles. One should critically explore all media in order to get a clearer picture of the event. Benedict Arnold is only one example of how one assumption can lead to centuries worth of misguided beliefs.

If history is meant to teach lessons, then we should teach them in a broader context. Narrow assumptions can lead to narrow judgments. To believe that George Washington cut the cherry tree, Paul Revere made the only midnight ride, and Benedict Arnold was truly evil, assumes that all history is about textbook definitions. Cookie cutter history is fine for obtaining a basis of knowledge, but in order to truly learn history, one has to look beyond the cookie cutter facts and explore history from various points of view. There is not one right way of interpreting events, but many ways. One-sidedness can lead to bias that can continue on for generations, and as Billy states, we do not want the next generation to suffer the mistakes of the past, but to learn from them in order to create a clearer picture of who we are.

⁴⁰ Peter Taylor, *Loyalists: War and Peace in Northern Ireland* (New York: TV Books, 1999), 11.

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